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AUTHOR	Cifuentes, Lauren; Murphy, Karen L.
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ABSTRACT

This case study reports on collaborative activities among four fourth grade teachers and their students over a year and explores the effectiveness of distance learning for international team teaching. Two classes in Mexico City conducted school activities with two classes in College Station (Texas). Researchers examined: school activities that successfully bring children of Mexican and Texan cultures together to learn with, about, and from each other; similarities and differences in language skills and pastimes between the children of both cultures; and prevailing impressions Mexican and Texan children had of each other prior to their distance learning activities. Activities were designed to help the students understand each other's cultures by walking in each other's footsteps. The investigation relied on arts-based case study methods. Content analyses were conducted of lesson plans and observations, students' poems about the other nation, students' stories about a day in the life of a child in the other culture, student questionnaires, students' collages, and student self-profiles. Mexican children had enough experience of U.S. culture to accurately describe it in poetry. Most Texan children had little knowledge of Mexico and had to write about their own culture, create an imaginary place, or refer to stereotypes in order to create a poem. (Author/ MES)

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By:

Lauren Cifuentes & Karen L. Murphy

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International Team Teaching: A Partnership Between Mexico and Texas

Lauren Cifuentes
Karen L. Murphy
Texas A&M University

Abstract

In this case study, we report on collaborative activities among four fourth grade teachers and their students over a year and explore the effectiveness of distance learning for international team teaching. Two classes in Mexico City conducted school activities with two classes in College Station, Texas. We asked—What are some school activities that successfully bring children of Mexican and Texan cultures together to learn with, about, and from each other? What similarities and differences in language skills and pastimes exist between the children of both cultures? What prevailing impressions did Mexican and Texan children have of each other prior to their distance learning activities? The activities in the partnership were designed to help the students understand each other's cultures by walking in each other's footsteps. Mexican children had enough experience of U.S culture to be able to accurately describe the culture in poetry. On the other hand, most Texan children had little knowledge of Mexico and had to write about their own culture, create an imaginary place, or refer to stereotypes in order to create a poem.

Background and Theoretical Perspective

In this case study, we report on collaborative activities among four fourth grade teachers and their students over a year and explore the effectiveness of distance learning for international team teaching. Two classes in Mexico City conducted school activities with two classes in College Station, Texas. In a previous study, diverse students collaborated across Texas on multicultural activities, which helped them grow in self-esteem and multicultural understanding (Cifuentes, Murphy, & Davis, 1998). The cross-classroom collaboration, Cultural Connections, made it possible for students to expand their world-views in preparation for contributing in our increasingly multicultural environment. The previous study demonstrated that in networked classrooms students can connect with distant others to learn about and from their perspectives and to increase their multicultural understanding. In addition, distance technologies can foster team teaching across cultures and geographical distances within Texas. Four overarching themes emerged from the data: growth, empowerment, comfort with technology, and mentoring. These themes permeated each data source and applied to all participants of the Texas project. Participants grew personally and intellectually. They felt empowered to achieve goals. They became comfortable with technology, and they provided and/or received mentoring. Students mentored and learned from each other. They also had the benefit of receiving mentoring from both their local and distant teachers. We expect that the international Cultural Connections project will have similar yet unique effects.

Distance technologies expand the range of opportunities for students to build relationships with people of different cultures. In the current social-constructivist conception of learning, "education is the shared way of thinking about one's self, the community, and the world" (Riel, 1995, p. 219). Therefore, schools might play a significant role in nurturing students' positive identity formation, spirit of community, and multicultural perspectives by providing them with opportunities to build distant relationships. In order to become more tolerant and respectful citizens, students need to develop relationships with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds (Moffett, 1994). Geographical and cultural isolation can limit opportunities for relationship building beyond one's culture. However, cross-classroom collaboratives allow students to connect with distant others from around the world. The collaborative learning process has the potential to transform individual participants' perspectives from parochial to global (Cummins & Sayers, 1995).

In the current study we applied the Cultural Connections model with an international team of teachers. Predominantly Mexican students in Sierra Nevada Bilingual School in Mexico City collaborated with diverse students in Rock Prairie Elementary School in College Station, Texas, primarily via interactive videoconference with occasional email. To facilitate building a broad world-view in their students, educators provided collaborative learning experiences for social construction of meaning. Telecommunications were used to expand the range of exposure to multicultural interactions (Cummins & Sayers, 1995).

Research Questions

Participating teachers conducted at least six distance learning experiences with their students over a school year. They planned the shared units of study using telecommunications. In this study we asked—

1. What are some school activities that successfully bring children of Mexican and Texan cultures together to learn with, about, and from each other?

2. What similarities and differences in language skills and pastimes exist between the children of both cultures?
3. What prevailing impressions did Mexican and Texan children have of each other prior to their distance learning activities?

Methods

Four teachers, two in Mexico City and two in College Station, TX, partnered for planning and implementation of curricular activities with their students. The forty-one fourth grade students in two classes in College Station and the forty-six fourth grade students in two classes in Mexico City were active in the partnership throughout the academic year. The Mexican school was a private school that met in a converted home in an exclusive neighborhood of the city. The Texan school was public. The school partners in both Texas and Mexico City were equipped with interactive compressed video systems at local distance learning centers, multimedia software, and Internet connections. Project administrators in both Texas and Mexico helped with planning and facilitation of connections. As in the Texas partnerships, several of the curricular activities were stimulated by the book *I Felt Like I Was From Another Planet* (Dresser, 1994). For example, in a pilot study, the students conducted an activity on table manners by acting out and discussing the table manners typical of their own cultures. In the main study, teachers conducted ongoing activities between September and June.

The investigation relied on arts-based case study methods We conducted content analyses of each of several data sources: (a) lesson plans and observations of lesson implementation, (b) students' poems about each others' nations, (c) students' stories about a day in the life of a child in the other culture, (d) student questionnaires, (e) student collages, and (f) student self-profiles. We looked for emergent themes and gained consensus on the extent to which the data sources revealed answers to the research questions. As a result, we provide rich description of the project in order to answer the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

Question 1: What are some school activities that successfully bring children of Mexican and Texan cultures together to learn about each other?

The activities in the partnership were designed to help the students understand each other's cultures by walking in each other's footsteps. First, all four classes attended poetry writing workshops in which they wrote poems about the other nation. Though many students, particularly the Texans, had only a vague concept of the other nation, they were asked to pretend that they were the others' nation and to write an "I am..." poem of images and activities that define that nation. Secondly, the students wrote a story of a day in the life of a fourth grader in the others' country. In addition, they filled out a survey that provided some indication of the values and artistic interests of each child (see Appendix A). They also created a student profile sheet with their picture on it that described their families, favorite subjects in school, favorite foods, and special interests. They shared these poems, stories, surveys, and profiles with each other during the school year.

The classes met twice for one and one-half hours of videoconferencing in which they introduced themselves, showed collages of images that represented their family and interests, and shared personal ancestry. In a third videoconference they conducted the activity described below:

The Alamo: A Distance Learning Activity

Objectives:

As a result of participating in the activities students will be able to--

1. describe why the battle of the Alamo occurred.
2. create a dramatic representation of the battle.
3. write an essay comparing the U.S. and Mexican interpretations of the story of the Alamo.

Resources:

1. Brief story of the Alamo without mention of the names of Mexico, the U.S. or the Alamo (see Appendix B).
2. Chapters covering the story of the Alamo from the Texas history text and from the Mexican history text.

Activities:

Preliminary to the videoconference:

1. Students read a short story associated with the story behind the battle of the Alamo. The names Mexico, the U.S., and the Alamo are changed so that students can read objectively.
2. Students pretend that they are a person at the battle. They choose a side that they are on and write a diary entry about what they do and what happens to them.
3. The teacher tells students that the facts they read are about the Alamo of 1836.
4. Students read chapters from the Texas text and the Mexican text and conduct supportive reading activities.
5. The whole class identifies similarities and differences between the stories told in the texts.
6. Each student writes a comparative essay regarding interpretations of the battle of the Alamo.

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7. In small groups or as a whole class, students develop a brief (10 minute) reenactment of a story about the Alamo.
8. Teacher selects one (or more) short stories for presentation to the distant audience.
9. Teacher selects one (or more) comparative essay for presentation to the distant audience.
10. Teacher selects one reenactment for presentation to the distant audience.

Activities during the videoconference:

1. Students alternate across sites to read their diary entries.
2. Students alternate across sites to perform their reenactments.
3. Students alternate across sites to read their comparative essays.

Activities back in the classroom:

1. Share what they remember from the diaries, reenactments, and essays.
2. Review what was learned about the reasons for and events of the battle of the Alamo and the different perspectives of Mexico and the U.S.

Approximately a month after the videoconference in which students explored the 1836 battle for Texas, the classes videoconferenced to share folktales and songs with each other. For the next videoconference students created a school mural and shared pictures of the murals in their city and town and discussed their contents. For a final videoconference they exchanged recipes and party traditions and had a shared celebration. The Texans had a fiesta while the Mexicans had a party.

The students participated fully in the above activities and took great interest in each other. Through the activities students tried to get into the shoes of another culture and acquired curiosity about each others' perspectives. Each activity led to a flood of student questioning regarding the life of the distant others. Students saw that they were both similar and different from each other in many ways. Each of the activities initiated by the project appeared to bring the children together for greater understanding of each other's similarities and differences.

Question 2: What similarities and differences in language skills and pastimes exist between the children of both cultures?

Five of the 41 Texan students knew two languages while the rest knew only English. Second languages were Hindi, Icelandic, Spanish, Chinese and Korean. All of the 46 Mexican students were at least bilingual in Spanish and English and eight of the Mexican students spoke languages other than Spanish and English. Those languages included French, Italian, German, Portuguese, and Hebrew. As was expected, the two groups had English in common. Although the Mexican students spoke English fluently, the American students had difficulty attending to the Mexicans' speech via videoconference. Understanding the strong Spanish accent via videoconference technology required great concentration on the part of the Texan fourth graders. In addition, that most Texans could only speak or read in English proved to be a significant barrier. For instance, we had to have the Spanish text chapter regarding the Texas Revolution translated so that the students could study the Mexican perspective.

Learning about and comparing ancestry was important to the project because it helped children recognize that we are multicultural societies and are interconnected through our transience. Students across groups had, of course, different ancestries, but were pleased to learn of similarities as well. Three of the Mexican children were born outside Mexico. Two were born in the U.S. including one who was born in Houston. Another was born in Caracas, Venezuela. All other Mexican children were born in Mexico. Similarly, only two of the Texan children were born outside the U.S., one in India and the other in South Korea. Going back just one generation, however, the students revealed that many of their families are new to their nations. Seven of the Mexican children had parents who were born in the U.S. and nine other children had parents born in six other countries. Ten of the Texan children had parents who were born outside of the U.S. Two of those children's parents were born in Mexico.

Thorough analysis of the survey's contents will reveal a great deal more about shared and disparate interests among the children. Preliminary findings inform us regarding student's perceived similarities and differences. After students met to share their collages, their discussion led to their drawing the following conclusions: "They (the distant class) are the same as us!" They exhibited the same taste for pizza and tacos, admiration of hair ribbons and watches for the girls, high regard for Michael Jordan, sports, and fast cars, for the boys, and appreciation of rock music across genders. The Texan children observed that the Mexican children were also different from them in many ways. They all spoke at least two languages; their names all sounded different from the Texans; they traveled more than the Texan children; they created more "decorative" collages; they spoke English with an accent; and soccer was generally the favorite sport (while the Texans preferred football or baseball). All but one Mexican student had been to the U.S., while only two Texans had been to Mexico.

Question 3: What prevailing impressions did Mexican and Texan children have of each other prior to their distance learning activities?

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A preliminary examination of the poems that students wrote about each other's countries prior to meetings revealed that the Mexican children had enough experience of U.S culture to be able to accurately describe the culture in poetry. On the other hand, most Texan children had little knowledge of Mexico and had to write about their own culture, create an imaginary place, or refer to stereotypes. During the poetry workshop, students were encouraged to write both good and bad things about each other's countries. Most importantly they were to be honest in their imagery.

Poetic imagery in the Mexican student's poems included pervasive institutions such as Toys-R-Us and shopping malls; defining places such as Disneyland and Las Vegas; prevalent foods such as ice cream, popcorn, and hamburgers; and symbols such as the Statue of Liberty and the Golden Gate Bridge. Several Mexicans wrote of the clean air in the U.S. that contrasts with that in Mexico City. The imagery of the U.S was generally positive and accurate, however, some Mexican students captured both negative and positive aspects of the U.S. in their poems. One student referred to the historic connection between Mexico and the U.S. when he wrote, "I am formed by old parts of Mexico."

I am the United States by Nicholas Aguilar
I am the United States,
I am a smelly place,
I am the taller building,
I am scratching the sky,
I am teaching children,
I am turning them bright,
I am a glorious state,
I am playing in the street,
I am breathing air,
I am a tornado,
I am killing them all,
I am a little polluted,
I am driving all around,
I am a car blowing his horn,
I am going down on a toboggan,
I am swimming in the pool,
I am a noisy place,
I am the United States,
I am Sylvester Stalone,
I am going on a bicycle.

I am the United States by Emiliano Gordillo
I am a kid playing on a patio
I am a house
I am a school and I see kids playing
I am green grass and persons step on me
I am water flowing through the Mississippi River
I am a rock that blocks water
I am white sand and kids play with me
I am the United States
I am an acorn falling from a tree
I am light and I give light to persons
I am the flag of the United States
I am the 50 stars of the flag and kids sing for me

I am the United States by Jose Lach
I touch land and I touch all the happiness and sadness.
I am a big person with many people in me and I can Not move and if I move a disaster comes in me

I am the biggest in America and I am a person with a country full of rivers
I am a country with many people
I am a country between Mexico and Canada
I am full of big shops, and you can come and visit me
And it will make me happier and I'll make you happy
I am a very old place
I am formed by old parts of Mexico

If you come I'll be glad to make you play and
I'll be glad to keep you safe
I am very clean
I am not full of pollution

Poetic imagery in the Texan students' poems included language from the poetry writing workshop such as graveyards, beer cans, peaches, and churches. Texans seemed to draw from their local community rather than from pictures or travels in Mexico to find images to include in their poems. They wrote of general characteristics such as seasons without knowing for sure that they were describing Mexico. As with the Mexican writers, the Texans' imagery of Mexico was generally positive, however many of the images were neither unique to Mexico or even characteristic of Mexico. Accurate imagery included piñatas, courtyards, tortillas, and sombreros.

I Am Mexico by James Knight
I am a road
I am a peach in a person's hand
I am a sun in the summer
I am snow in the winter
I am leaves in the fall
I am flowers in the spring
I am rocks in the dirt
I am wood in the weeds

I Am Mexico by Toura Go
I am Mexico with tortillas in the air
I am a country with ghosts around me
I am summer with all the sun
I am the moon the wind the sun
I am a store with Mexican food
I am a country with hardly any rain
I am a country with lots of parades
With ghost piñatas and Mexican songs we celebrate a birthday
My sleep is filled with dreams I never had before
I am a country called Mexico

I Am Mexico by Cyndi Hall
I am Mexico
I am the corn in the fields
I am the drawbridge between rivers and dry land
I'm the flowers in the yard,
I am out in a blizzard
I am the rain in a thunderstorm
I am the waves in the ocean
I'm the fish in the lake
I'm trees that grow in springtime
I am the fire in the fireplace
I'm the home on someone's land,
I'm the graves in the courtyard
I'm the guns in the closet
I am chili in the pan
I am horses in the stalls
I'm the church in the grass
I'm the clouds in the sky
I am the stars shiny way up high
I'm the relationship between two lovers

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Educational and Scientific Implications

The year of Cultural Connections between Mexican and Texan children is still in progress. The data described above have been collected. However, more thorough analyses need to be conducted for in-depth understanding of answers to the research questions. Still, the story of this case of international team teaching provides a model for others to expand their learning communities beyond national borders. We have learned of the importance of administrators in facilitating the processes and supporting the teachers who implement distance learning in the K-12 environment.

As we continue to explore the research questions above and gain insight into the effects of distance learning on K-12 students, we will also ask, "How closely do students' impressions of their distant partners match their self-impressions?" as well as, "What impressions do Mexican and Texan children have of each other after a year of distance learning together?" By comparing perceptions and misconceptions of students before and after the year of experiences we will gain further insight into the effects. We will also compare effects of multicultural activities that require children to walk in each other's shoes vs. those that involve the more typical approach of sharing one's own culture.

A Web board for student online discussion has been created and teachers have been informed for months of its existence, but they have yet to have their students use the space for collaborative writing. In the future we plan to facilitate integration of the Web board as well as desktop videoconferencing to support student collaboration. By incorporating a variety of distance technologies, students will have greater opportunity to gain mutual understanding.

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Appendix A

Student Survey

1. Have you ever traveled to another country?
2. If so where?
3. How many languages can you speak?
4. What language(s) do you speak?
5. What language do you speak at home the most?
6. How do you feel about studying English?
7. If you could create the ideal day, how would you spend it?
8. What kind(s) of music do you like to listen to?
9. Do you create art? And if so, describe your favorites (music, drawing, painting, dancing, sculpting, or writing).
10. What kinds of reading do you like? Books, newspapers, comic books, magazines, etc.
11. About what subjects do you like to read?
12. How do you know right from wrong?
13. If there is time and you would like to, draw a picture here.

Appendix B

THE BATTLE OF COTTONWOOD RIDGE

Read the following explanation of why the Battle of Cottonwood Ridge was fought. Pretend you are from The Nation or from The Country and write a diary entry telling why you believe Cottonwood Ridge is yours, what you do about it during the battle, and who finally wins Cottonwood Ridge.

There once was a beautiful place called Cottonwood Ridge where Spaniards set up a mission whose purposes were to (1) convert native Americans to Christianity, (2) educate them, and (3) establish a Spanish territory. Cottonwood Ridge served as a Spanish mission for almost 100 years until a terrible sickness killed all of the people living there except the Native Americans.

People who were ruled by Spain lived in The Nation to the south of Cottonwood Ridge and there were people from The Country to the East of Cottonwood Ridge. People from The Nation and people from The Country both started to settle the land around Cottonwood Ridge.

Then the people from The Nation fought a war with Spain and gained independence so that they could rule themselves. Part of winning the war meant that they won Cottonwood Ridge from the Spaniards. They banned granting land to people from The Country.

People from France said that they owned Cottonwood Ridge and they sold it to the people from The Country. Now the people from The Nation and the people from The Country both believed that they ruled Cottonwood Ridge. They fought a battle over who would rule the land surrounding Cottonwood Ridge.

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